

the ROI of RMM: rich MEDIA management meets ECOMMERCE

It's been more than three years since this column looked at image and video content management ("Here's Waldo," February 1998). At that time, the focus was on image recognition. According to Gartner Group, visual content search and retrieval still remains among the top enterprise technologies. Over the past year, many new players have emerged with innovative ecommerce applications for rich media management, including content indexing and security, digital rights management, content transformation, and delivery. Here are two European companies with interesting applications of rich media to ecommerce.

First is the French startup LTU Technologies, awarded a silver medal in last year's Wall Street Journal Europe's Innovation Awards. LTU applies its core visual analysis technologies in a variety of products. You present the LTU engine with an image or video clip of, say, an apple and say "find me more like this." The engine then produces an absolute content description in XML or a relative description showing similar images, and delivers close matches. In my tests of Image-Seeker, I found it did reasonably well—not perfectly, but then a potato (in French) is an apple of the earth, n'est-ce pas?


LTU's content filtering technology is also very good at distinguishing pornographic images. I tried out Image-Filter as part of my press evaluation (honestly!) and got some eye-popping results. LTU provided me with stock photo tests of models in various states of déshabille, along with photos of a sunset, necklace, and a rose. I added to this test set my close-up photo of Fra Angelico's "Last Supper." The image filter clearly identified the X-rated photo; it rated as acceptable both the mural close-up and a PG-rated model photo (Fra Angelico's innocent work squeaked by, though it rated a bit racier than the PG picture). No porn filter is perfect, but this one is surprisingly good. Image-Filter was recently selected by GROUP Software to power its new securiQ.Xblock email security module, looking for objectionable graphics. LTU also has been named a vendor of choice for the U.S. Customs CyberSmuggling Center program. LTU applied its technology to develop a tool for cracking international child pornography trafficking. Other likely uses of this technology may help libraries and public schools enforce the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA).

Additional applications include classifying enterprise and consumer visual content; visual database searching; digital rights management, locating misused or stolen logos, trademarks, or images; and industrial property design policing. European online auction service iBazar, recently acquired by eBay, uses LTU's Image-Shopper. This lets users and merchants alike visually compare products or look for similar ones. M6, one of the largest TV networks in France, uses LTU products for video scene detection, automatically placing video segments on the Web.

Another example of practical rich media ecommerce applications comes from Day Software, a Basel, Switzerland-based company with offices in Newport Beach, California. The basic problem Day solves is the locking up of information in cantons or "information stovepipes," provincial departments that are tight with their information. Day's ContentBus provides a common virtual repository for all types of information. Unlike some vendors, Day focuses on "Content Unification" rather than attempting to integrate disparate existing corporate applications. Unifying information at the browser or device level, Day says, is more cost-effective than applications integration.

When Day went public in 2000, it introduced Communiqué, a holistic content management product targeted at Fortune 1000 companies. Communiqué (now packaged as three increasingly powerful systems) manages all types of digital content and processes and delivers information via Web browsers. Day has a refreshing attitude about content. Tom Kuhr, Day's VP of marketing and product development and content management evangelist, preaches ten key requirements for managing content. The first commandment according to Kuhr is "Everything is Content." Thus, Day's product line is industry- and content-independent, designed according to the notion that a single system should provide access to all types of data, systems, and applications. Day's ultimate goal: total business unification, i.e., seamless access to and management of all business content, including images and rich media.

Day's customers range from the International Olympic Committee to Rush Limbaugh. From the outset, rushlimbaugh.com focused on profitability, with a base site supported by banner ads and a "members-only" super site offering premium content for a fee. The keys to profitability were low cost and letting content creators focus on their expertise rather than technology. Communiqué lets program authors manage and update databases of radio stations carrying Limbaugh's show. Authors also can dynamically select, optimize, and upload images, and create headlines rendered as .gif images on-the-fly.

As content changes, Communiqué automatically generates new navigation buttons. When Limbaugh expanded his product with email newsletters, access to archived radio broadcasts, and streaming video feeds of special events or televised appearances, Communiqué kept site author workloads manageable and the site responsive. In little more than seven months, subscriptions at rushlimbaugh.com became a seven-figure business—showing that managing rich media properly can enrich profits, too. 

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